



## *Prussian Army Soldiers and the Seven Years' War: The Psychology of Honour* by Katrin Möbius and Sascha Möbius.

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Despite the special appeal for many military historians of eighteenth-century warfare—its well-studied battles and leaders and military thinking—one critical facet of it remains little studied: the perspective of the common soldier. The consensus has been that even the small minority of men who were literate did not record their experiences of battle. Some recent studies have sought to tease out the viewpoints of typical soldiers. In *Prussian Army Soldiers and the Seven Years' War*, historians Katrin and Sascha Möbius seek to close this major gap in our understanding of how eighteenth-century soldiers perceived the experience of battle. In doing so, they challenge conventional wisdom about eighteenth-century soldiers not only in Prussia, their focus, but across Europe as well.

The book draws on numerous memoirs, officers' and chaplains' diaries, and over fifty letters of common soldiers, including twelve that the authors discovered and translated for the first time. While this constitutes a small sample size, the authors' astute analyses of the documents bring forth many new insights about the training and discipline of soldiers, their ties to the broader society, and perceptions of the experience of battle. In their introduction, the authors set their work in the context of the historiography of eighteenth-century warfare, noting, for example, that

Most scholars dealing with the mentalities of *ancien régime* armies still regard the soldiers' fear of the officers and the latter's outright use of force, as the main factors which motivated soldiers in combat; they had already been reduced to numb automatons on the drill square. (2)

Three long chapters follow in which the authors scrutinize the various source material from a variety of perspectives.<sup>1</sup> They set out to open a novel line of inquiry against the prevailing view by concentrating on the common soldiers' sense of honor: they maintain that soldiers' willingness to undergo the hardships of military life and combat derived from their being “embedded in a system of religious beliefs, estate, reputation and honour” (2).

Three long chapters closely scrutinize the twelve letters from various perspectives. Chapter 1 begins with a succinct description of Prussian drill practices in the target period. The authors then turn to the composition of the Prussian army. They find that, contrary to received wisdom, most soldiers in Frederick's army, at least at the outset of the Seven Years' War, were residents of the Prussian state, that is *Kantonisten* (cantonists) rather than *Ausländer* (foreigners). The Prussian army was made up of men from respectable commoner families rather than outcasts of society.

The authors also dispute the persistent notion that the men feared their own officers more than they did their opponents. They contend that this was unlikely, given the harsh, even abusive

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1. Specifically, T.C.W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787-1802* (NY: St. Martin's, 1996), and Christopher Duffy, *Frederick the Great: A Military Life* (London: Routledge, 1985).

disciplinary regimen prevalent in the contemporary school system. The authors also delve into land warfare tactics in the Seven Years' War. This lays the groundwork for their contention, again on the basis of the letters, that some soldiers experienced what we today call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD.

In chapter 2, the authors deconstruct how the men passed on news in their letters home. Beyond merely relating events, the letters convey the emotional state of their writers as well as their religious beliefs. The latter helped the soldiers cope not only with battlefield trauma, but with simply sustaining themselves through the hardships of life on campaign. Attacking the image of soldiers as mere automatons, the authors focus on the various fears revealed in their letters. One of them was sheer panic—as in the “panic-stricken mass flight of entire battalions, regiments or even armies” (104). They contrast this with what the soldiers called *heat*—“one of the most widely used terms for describing emotions and physical reactions of soldiers in combat in German eighteenth-century military sources” (107). Paradoxically, this latter emotion could invest soldiers with an overwhelming desire to fight rather than flee in fear. This overcoming of fear added to the regiment's communal sense of honor as well.

Chapter 3 explains the discrete concepts of honor held by officers and enlisted soldiers as reflections of social status: “The soldiers' estate basically consisted of two other estates: the officers and the other ranks, which corresponded to the nobility; and the commoners (peasantry/artisans and merchants) in civil life” (131).

Also explored is how Prussian soldiers perceived their various opponents during the Seven Years' War. Specifically, like Frederick II, they saw the Russians as “uncivilized scum” (141) and considered the Austrians to be their chief foes: “If the Prussian rank and file had an arch-enemy, it was the Austrians. The soldiers' letters are full of complaints about the Austrians acting against the customs of war during and especially after the battle of Lobositz” (142). But they also reveal that hatred of the enemy was not the Prussian soldiers' chief motivation for fighting. They were more concerned over how their actions would be perceived in their home communities.

The fourth and final chapter recaps the findings of the preceding investigations and sketches a composite of the Prussian common soldier. Two appendices offer a solid discussion of pertinent eighteenth-century military works used by the authors and translations of the letters that form the basis of their inquiries.

*Prussian Army Soldiers* is a salutary effort to give a voice to common soldiers in the armies of *ancien régime* Europe. It will engage and instruct serious general readers and advanced undergraduates and inspire specialists in military history to continue on its distinctive path of source-based research.